



Texas First Ladies: The Better Half of Presidents Day

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

We paused this month to honor America's first president and the subsequent great men who followed, and guided our nation safely across the river of time.

Yet, as Hubert Humphrey once said: "Behind every great man is a surprised mother-in-law."

Texas is blessed with two native daughters whose contributions to our state and nation as American first ladies have improved the daily lives of countless millions.

Claudia Alta Taylor, "Lady Bird" to her fortunate friends, was born in 1912 near the East Texas town of Karnack. Laura Bush was born in 1946 in Midland, the West Texas city to which she would return for a backyard barbeque and meet her future husband. These two Texans have worked tirelessly to improve the environment and the culture of America.

While First Lady, Lady Bird led the largest landscaping project in history, the planting of more than two million tulip and daffodil bulbs in Washington, D.C. And that was just a hint of things to come.

Her work manifested itself in many ways, including the Highway Beautification Bill in 1965, and the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin in 1982. It was officially renamed after her in 1997—on her 85th birthday.

In 1977, President Ford presented Lady Bird with the country's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom. She later received the Congressional Medal of Freedom from President Reagan in 1988.

Laura Bush, an educator and librarian, did not abandon her interests after her marriage. As First Lady of Texas, she created the Texas Book Festival as a way to encourage reading, a tribute to our state's vast pool of literary talent and a fundraiser for libraries.

Tens of thousands attend the event in Austin each year, and an estimated \$2 million has been awarded to more than 600 public libraries in Texas Book Festival grants. Public libraries use the funds to buy books or fund literacy or technology initiatives.

And when her husband was elected president in 2000, Mrs. Bush took the show on the road. The National Book Festival, now held in collaboration with the Library of Congress, piques interest in reading by highlighting authors of acclaim in America.

Certain aspects of the two Texas women's lives have remarkable similarities.

Both graduated from Texas universities armed with advanced degrees in the liberal arts. Lady Bird, according to a historian, was determined to be a newspaper

reporter, but also earned a teaching certificate.

Mrs. Bush has said of her years following graduation: "I particularly wanted to teach in a minority school, and I loved it."

Both women have worked hard to advance the cause of equal rights. Mrs. Johnson campaigned tirelessly for civil rights as the nation fought over the issue in the 1960s.

Mrs. Bush has led campaigns to empower women living in oppressive cultures, and ensure HIV/AIDS drugs reach patients in impoverished nations.

Both also have two daughters, named after adored family members.

Lynda Robb was named after her father, and sister Luci Turpin was named after the President's youngest sister. Twins Jenna and Barbara Bush are named after their grandmothers, who both reside in Texas.

One of those grandmothers, Mrs. George H. W. Bush, is the only woman in American history to be descended from a President, married to a President and the mother of a President. A distant cousin was President Franklin Pierce.

A native of New York City, Barbara Bush has been counted by those within the Lone Star State as a Texan since her arrival in West Texas in the 1940s.

One of America's most quotable first ladies ever, Barbara Bush contemplated the future of the American presidency in a commencement speech at Wellesley College in 1990: "Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the president's spouse. I wish him well!"

That gentleman, whoever he may be, will have his work cut out for him as he attempts to match the accomplishments of the Texas first ladies of America.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Refugees and Border Security subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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